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ABSTRACT

The anthropological study of women has recently developed into an intellectual discipline which investigates women's relationships to themselves, men, and society. The creation of this new subject of inquiry poses important demands upon anthropological theory and method. The nature of the subject demands a reassessment of potential bias derived from the male-oriented nature of traditional anthropological studies. Persons involved with the anthropology of women suggest that there is a need to identify social determinants and conditions of theory in order to clarify existing anthropological bias. In extreme form, this bias is represented by the anthropological tradition of a male anthropologist looking at male-dominated institutions through the eyes of a male informant and assuming his results to be representative of the entire fabric of social reality. Less extreme forms of bias include unconscious acceptance of hierarchical thinking or an unquestioned culture specific or class based consciousness. In each case--identification of theoretical bias and specification of ideological determinants of theory and observed reality--the anthropology of women demands a focus upon specific problems whose resolution is important to the entire discipline of anthropology. (Author/IE)

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THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF WOMEN:

AN ADVOCACY POSITION

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The origin and growth in the past half-decade of the anthropological study of women can be traced to the experience of a group of anthropologists who, in response to both student demand and their own concern, began formulating curricula for the teaching of the subject, began focusing - methodologically and theoretically - upon those pivotal social relations whose presence and significance were being revealed. In the process of developing such courses and expanding their investigations to include women and the relation of women to themselves, men and society, these anthropologists have encountered a subject hitherto all but ignored by mainstream anthropology. Several of the most comprehensive and widely-used collections of writings in the anthropology of women are the results of such encounters (eg., Rosaldo and Lamphere, 1974; Reiter, 1975) and reflect not only the impetus but also the inspiration such encounters bring to anthropological investigation. Of perhaps greater consequence than the opening of a new subject of inquiry, however, is the demand that questions of vital importance to that subject place upon extant theory and method. This is certainly true of the anthropology of women, a subject whose central issues raise theoretical and methodological problems customarily avoided or denied by traditional anthropology.

In the process of our teaching a course on the anthropology of women, we have experienced the excitement of dealing with a subject of vital interest and broad relevance, as well as the frustration of realizing the inadequacies of our own and anthropology's assumptions in dealing with certain of the key issues raised by the subject. In answer to demands made by our students for relevance to their own lives and struggles as women and men, we examined the cross-cultural indications of universal female oppression; and discovered through our examination as much our own bias toward some sort of universal system of social stratification as any universal male scheme to oppress women.

In response to our obvious culture-specific bias we attempted an objective study of the sub-dominant position of women in society, seeking economic and social correlates to low status. Here, again we were confronted with contradictions: women whose participation in a major share of socially necessary labour would seem to indicate high or equal social status vis a vis men were still subject to and constrained behaviorally by an ideology of male dominance (Netting, 1969; Michaelson and Goldschmidt, 1971; Murphy and Murphy, 1974). To deal with such contradictions as general, wide-spread phenomena, we turned our attention to the nature:female/culture:male dichotomy which attempts to understand the relative status of women vis a vis men in terms of the structural position of women in social life as wives and mothers in a domestic or private as opposed to a cultural or public sphere of activity. (Ortner, 1974; Rosaldo, 1974). In this universalistic scheme, however, we encountered a degree of cultural determinism which, like the biological determinism it is ^{said} to combat, offered incomplete and not very satisfying explanations of low female status.

Partly because we were women teaching a course about women to a class composed almost entirely of women, these issues became the immediate and primary focus of our investigations. Such issues as investigator bias, the contradiction between female social role and female social status, the analytical weakness of biological or cultural determinism, etc. surface, nevertheless, as central to the topic primarily because their management and investigation is essential for the anthropological understanding of women in society. Such an understanding, we've found, is not achieved by simple or partial explanations. Clearly, the anthropology of women - as a specific course or field of study - opens to question as many or more issues than it

resolves; indeed, it inspires a debate whose scope transcends the limits of classroom discussion or sub-disciplinary specialization to encompass topics of seminal importance to all of anthropology.

The growth of the subject - the anthropology of women- has seen the subsequent flowering of a debate, in print and departmental meetings, centering upon the relevance of the subject to anthropology. Yet the issues raised by such debate tend rather to circumvent the question of relevance altogether. Some among the debators would object to the anthropological focus upon women as "reductionist", assuming of such an approach a degree of specificity that would disallow any universal or structural explanations (Leeds, 1976); this is an unwarranted assumption which displays, at best, an unfamiliarity with the issues central to the subject. Others would tolerate the anthropology of women as a useful and necessary arena for debate among female anthropologists whose theoretical voices are seldom heard - or welcome - elsewhere, but would, it is assumed, question the value of the direction taken by such debate to the whole of anthropology. Both of these arguments, in assuming of the anthropology of women either contracted specificity or sex-bound singularity isolates the study of women from mainstream anthropology to an extent that effectively disarms or neutralizes its theories and practices. Whether intentional or determined by the structure of our science, such a posture not only ignores the importance of the questions raised in the study of women in relation to society - questions often left unanswered by mainstream anthropology's many other foci; but also denies anthropology a field and focus which might challenge and thus alter the traditional approach to anthropological investigation, explanation and dissemination.

The central questions encountered in the teaching of or concentration upon the anthropology of women are those dealing with anthropological bias and the origin and perpetuation of the ideology of social inequality. The obvious and initial problem of anthropological bias has to do with the potential analytical distortion of social reality by a male-oriented or androcentric anthropology. At its worse, this is represented by the anthropological tradition of a male anthropologist looking at male-dominated institutions through the eyes of a male informant and assuming his results to be representative of the entire fabric of social reality. Fortunately, such extreme bias is seldom encountered; and even when encountered in less extreme form, is usually managed by a more cautious and selective reading of material.

The anthropological bias that is less obvious and less easily managed is that which is couched in some sort of an allusion to universality. In one instance this appears as a willingness to impute universality to a set of categories, actions, or processes without a similar dedication to the discernment of the specific determinants of such phenomena; thereby overlooking analytically perhaps very important, more powerfully universal, sets of structural relations. In the case of the anthropological investigation of women, this may manifest itself in a contentment with discovering the 'essence' of women in their 'existence' in a social system¹. Such a view would not, however, be compelled to seek an understanding of the determinants and prerequisites of the social system through an examination of its action upon the existence of women within it. In another instance, such universality may so generalize

¹ This is paraphrased from a section of Marx's critique of Feuerbach (The German Ideology, 1845-46) in which Marx asserts that contradictions between 'existence' and 'essence', to appear as more than inevitable abnormalities of uncontrolled nature, must be examined as they related to material or historically determined process.

reality as to set the investigation of it "in the clouds as an independent realm" (Marx, 1972: 108), discouraging any recognition or discovery of material or ideological determinants of theory. Thus, by virtue of, say, an unconscious acceptance of hierarchical thinking or an unquestioned culture-specific or class-based consciousness, the investigator in the anthropology of women may be led to see oppressed women behind every cross-cultural bush.

In the anthropological study of women the true nature of each of these biases becomes immediately and unavoidably clear, appearing on the ^{one} hand as intellectual sexism, on the other in the guise of either crude cultural determinism or somewhat inappropriate feminist imperialism. The recognition and control of this bias is essential and demands of the anthropologist an adherence to the tenants of our holistic science as well as an avoidance of the traditional theoretical and practical snares of such science. Recognition of this bias forces the application of a relativistic approach - certainly a long-time tradition of anthropological practice - such that would preclude the rendering of value-judgements upon cross-cultural phenomena. Avoidance of the acknowledged theoretical impoverishment of this type of approach is handled as a process of controlling theoretical bias. Control of this bias demands an identification of its source as ideology - in the case of the anthropological study of women it appears often as an ideology of stratification - which may both condition our thinking and mask reality. The task of identifying the origin of such ideology is a non-relativistic pursuit requiring an acknowledgement of ideological bias which goes beyond theoretical orientation to an examination of social determinants of our own and observed reality.

This degree of commitment to the just treatment of our subject matter, to

the critical examination of our theories, has seldom been as recognized or as integral a part of the subject as in the anthropology of women. In an anthropological focus upon women, awareness of ideological bias and its action upon our investigations, ourselves, and the subject is both unavoidable and imperative: unavoidable in that a focus upon women uncovers the anthropological tradition of androcentrism that has undoubtedly served to bias both data and theories based upon such data; imperative in that as female anthropologists are confronted with a subject with whose central issues they strongly identify, all pretense to scientific objectivity disappears. In its place is a subjectivity whose roots and influence must be identified and qualified.

Interestingly, the demand for identifying the source of ideological bias on the part of the anthropologist studying women is encountered as a central anthropological issue in the study of women. While the basic issues of biological vs. cultural determinants of sex roles, cultural vs. natural domains, etc. continue to capture general public attention, many anthropologists studying women are particularizing these questions by narrowing their focus, concentrating upon specific relationships of women to society that may shed light upon the understanding of even the most antagonistic and seemingly universal of dichotomies. Central among these many foci is the specific issue of sexual stratification or, perhaps more appropriately, the ideology of sexual stratification.

In spite of all attempts to erradicate potential bias toward stratification on the part of the investigator, all economic or political correlates to the contrary, there seems to be a widespread cross-cultural tendency toward some degree of sexual stratification or a modicum of dependence upon an ideology of sexual stratification. When confronted with this phenomenon one must again

be careful to avoid either extreme of universalizing it or singularizing it. Such use of caution and hence avoidance of the traditional deficiencies of either extreme seems, as we discovered, almost mandated by the nature of the subject itself. For a relativistic or universalistic approach to the ideology of sexual stratification can only lead to an acceptance of the status quo tantamount to biological determinism on the one hand, cultural determinism on the other. Similarly, an approach to the ideology of sexual stratification in terms only of female oppression by male oppressors will serve only to engulf us in a potentially viscious debate of uncertain value and resolution. Rather, an approach to the ideology of sexual stratification must be taken that would seek to understand the specificity of the role of ideology in a social situation, thereby explicating not only its action upon and relation to women but also its profound and determined action in the broader context of society in general.

The discovery of widespread reliance upon an ideology of sexual stratification should serve not as final proof of a biologically or culturally ordained hierarchy nor as rationale for imposing one more bourgeoisie value upon the subject matter at hand. Nor should the study of it be relegated to a sub-discipline whose subject is suspect or considered incidental. Clearly, the role played by an ideology of sexual stratification in terms of female participation in society is not dissimilar from the role played by other social phenomena whose end is achieved in the differential apportionment of value to people and things. This being the case, the focus of research in the anthropology of women as it applies especially to the ideology of sexual stratification encompasses, by the very nature of the problem, issues central to anthropological investigation in general. Hence, the discovery of and focus upon the

ideology of sexual stratification should lend direction to research within and outside of the area of the anthropology of women that would contribute to our knowledge and acknowledgement of the determinants of the development of institutions - be they ideological, social, economic, or political - whose existence is based upon, indeed, perhaps dependent upon, the perpetuation of social inequity.

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